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## AVOIDANCE

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In a study of "conventionalities" I have recently made, certain social facts known to ethnologists under the rubric of "avoidance" have taken on a somewhat new look to me, and I now venture to present them thus recolored with only a preliminary word or two about the light cast upon them.

Social conventions, I take it, are determined by two deep and far-reaching instincts, the instinct of gregariousness or the desire for companionship, and the instinct for routine or the desire for the habitual. These instincts are seemingly incompatible, for our habits are readily upset by the habits of others and personality is most easily influenced by personality. This incompatibility is the task, more or less covert and subconscious, for social conventions to overcome, by supplying the kind of companionship that will be most innocuous to the routine of our life and by eliminating chances of companionship with those likely to disturb our routine. The task is enormous, but the method we in society take is very simple. We merely see to it that we associate only with our own kind and avoid those unlike us, or if physical contact is inevitable, that we raise up psychical barriers between them and ourselves. These barriers are the conventionalities of age, of sex, of "position," of nationality, or of race.

In the conventionalities of family life I see like barriers, and among them "avoidance" and its variations.

Conspicuous examples of avoidance occur between relatives by marriage. In some Victorian tribes a woman's mother and aunts may never in their lives speak to her suitor or husband or even look at him. Nor may a man mention his mother-in-law's name.<sup>1</sup> If a Wemba sees his mother-in-law coming along the path, he must at once retreat into the bush. If he meets her face to face, he must keep his eyes fixed on the ground,<sup>2</sup> a perfect picture

<sup>1</sup> Ernest Crawley, *The Mystic Rose* (London and New York, 1902), p. 400.

<sup>2</sup> C. Gouldsbury and H. Sheane, *The Great Plateau of Northern Rhodesia* (London, 1911), p. 259.

for the modern cartoonist. A Zulu woman may have nothing to do with her father-in-law or with any of her husband's relatives in the ascending line. She may not even name them to herself.<sup>1</sup> According to the *Lî Kî*, a Chinese sister-in-law and brother-in-law "do not interchange inquiries about each other,"<sup>2</sup> a degree of avoidance we ourselves may practice quite as fully by the opposite method of "asking about" him or her as a form of respect. "How do you do?" is a simple but most efficient formula for cutting off a personal communication.

The popular explanation of avoidance as an expression of respect comes nearer the truth, I think, than the orthodox scientific explanation of it as an incest rule. For respectful conduct is merely treating persons in a way which puts them at their ease, which does not disturb their settled habits; whereas to require anyone to make a sudden personal adjustment is never good manners, because it is never easy. Hence when a newcomer is introduced into the family, such a requirement may be precluded altogether, particularly, let us note, between those of a different age or of the opposite sex.

It is the fact that they may be of a different sex which is taken as an argument for explaining the practice as an incest rule. But a Zulu has to *hlonipa* her mother-in-law as well as her father-in-law. So has a Fijian woman,<sup>3</sup> and in Fiji and among the North American Indians a man may have to "avoid" his father-in-law as well as his mother-in-law.<sup>4</sup>

No, although in particular communities avoidance between those of the opposite sex related by marriage may be or may have become an incest inhibition, it is in general, I think, merely a case of the avoidance between the sexes usual in all communities,<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Crawley, p. 400.

<sup>2</sup> Book I, sec. i, Part III, 32.

<sup>3</sup> T. Williams and J. Calvert, *Fiji and the Fijians* (New York, 1859), p. 107.

<sup>4</sup> Crawley, pp. 402-3.

<sup>5</sup> It is not, however, an expression of sexual taboo in quite the sense Crawley gives it. Here as in his whole theory he seems to me to exaggerate, if not wholly to manufacture, the mystical element he sees in sex taboos. Difference of sex carries with it a sense of danger, to be sure, and this sense may express itself in supernatural ideas; but fundamentally sex taboos are devices against the encroachment of persons unlike oneself.

rendered particularly conspicuous by the introduction of a new-comer into the family circle.

It is as an expression of hostility aroused by this introduction that Tylor explained avoidance. As a stranger he or she is cut.<sup>1</sup> I differ with Tylor merely on the point that avoidance is first a natural and then a ceremonial method of shirking an adjustment in a personal relationship, rather than a method of deliberately marking a difference between the stranger and the family he or she marries into.

In support of what may be called the self-protective theory of avoidance it is to be noted that although avoidance may be for life, becoming a steadfast habit, in some cases, after a lapse of time, after people have had a chance to accustom themselves to their new relatives, shall we say, the practice of avoidance is given up. A Wemba may talk to his mother-in-law as soon as he is a father;<sup>2</sup> so may a Cree Indian.<sup>3</sup> An Armenian bride has to wear a veil of crimson wool over her face and is not allowed to address any senior member of her husband's household, but in course of time the house-father, well assured of her behavior, removes her veil and unloosens her tongue.<sup>4</sup>

Avoidance as we know is practiced not alone between relatives by marriage. What may be called avoidance symbolism figures in the initiation ritual of many tribes, notably in Australia, and tribal initiates have commonly to avoid women, particularly their own kinswomen, for varying periods. In the Elema district of New Guinea initiates leaving their *eravo* must not go near home, to preclude all possibility of being recognized by their kinswomen. A mother who brings her son food must by some noise signal her approach to give him time to run back into the *eravo*.<sup>5</sup> Although a Hottentot boy is so tied to his mother's apron-strings until his initiation that he is not allowed to talk with men at all, not even with his own father, after initiation—at eighteen—

<sup>1</sup> *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, XVIII (1888-89), 247-48.

<sup>2</sup> Gouldsbury and Sheane, p. 259.

<sup>3</sup> Tylor, *loc. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Lucy M. J. Garnett, *The Women of Turkey: The Christian Women* (London, 1896), p. 203.

<sup>5</sup> Holmes, *J.A.I.*, XXXII, 418.

he has to avoid his mother altogether, at the risk, if ever he speaks to her, of being derided as a baby—no doubt quite as trying an insult in Africa as in the United States.<sup>1</sup> A New Britain initiate enjoys the utmost freedom with women not of his own marriage class, but from his kinswomen he must sedulously hide away. If unfortunate enough to meet one in the bush, he must hand over to her anything he happens to have with him. This forfeit his friends have then to redeem for him, he being in disgrace until in this way they compensate the woman “for the shame of having met him.”<sup>2</sup>

It seems to me that such furtiveness on the part of initiates is an expression of the sense of awkwardness felt on both sides, by youths and kinswomen alike, through the break in their habitual relations. It is also an expression of reluctance to enter into new relations with those who have been associated with on other terms. In this case as in others the need for an adjustment of personal relations is most easily met or dodged by the raising of fresh barriers.

Such barriers, such variations in the practice of avoidance are to be seen again and again in family life. A New Caledonian boy is circumcised at three, given the *marron* or emblem of manhood, and expected thereafter to have nothing at all to do with his mother.<sup>3</sup> In the Society and Sandwich islands a boy takes food in his mother's company only when he is at her breast.<sup>4</sup> In China, when married aunts or sisters or daughters return home on a visit, they may not sit on the same mat or eat from the same dish with the males of the family.<sup>5</sup> “You had no business to be here, Boyne,” says an American mother in one of Howells' stories.<sup>6</sup> “I don't like boys hanging about where ladies are talking together, and listening.” In these instances, by the way, is not the incest hypothesis a little far-fetched? Is not the exclusiveness more easily accounted for on the theory that the difference of sex or of age is more considered than the likeness through kinship, or on the theory that the kinship feeling itself has altered? A Pacific Island or an American boy is

<sup>1</sup> Hutton Webster, *Primitive Secret Societies* (New York, 1908), p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> B. Danks, “Marriage Customs of the New Britain Group,” *J.A.I.*, XVIII, 287.

<sup>3</sup> Webster, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> *Lt Kt*, Book I, sec. i, Part III, 35.

<sup>4</sup> Ellis, *Polynesian Researches*, I, 263.

<sup>6</sup> *The Kentons*, chap. vi.

*shy* with his mother when he recollects her sex and age. A Chinese father is *distant* with his daughter when her marriage not only emphasizes her age and sex, but means that she has joined another kinship group.

Keeping one's distance in family life, disguising one's personality or masking many phases of it, family reserves, family humor, the evasions of family conversation are psychical forms of avoidance perhaps more significant and more general than we realize, but avoidance in its narrower technical sense is not after all such a common occurrence. It is really an exception to the usual way of encountering—or shirking—a change in personal relations—the way of ceremony.